“I'd rather fill one bottle of wine that costs three million dollars than fill three million bottles that cost one dollar.”

Manfred Krankl
Manfred Krankl is one of the wine world’s best examples of the American dream. His beginnings were relatively humble, growing up in his native Austria and going to hospitality school to learn the basics of the hotel and catering industries. In his early 20s, Manfred decided to fly the nest and headed across the Atlantic with his best friend, landing in Toronto with dreams of starting a new adventure in Canada. After a couple of weeks of boozing and partying - and failing to find a job thanks to his lacklustre language skills - they decided to head home to Europe, jumping on a freight ship that was bound for Greece. A few more weeks of frivolity ensued before they found their way home to Austria, but while on Mykonos Manfred had met an American girl called Elaine - a meeting that would inspire a second trip to North America, this time with California as his destination.

It was 1980 when he touched down in Los Angeles, this time determined to make a success of his migration. With his background in the food service industry, he managed to get himself a job at the Beverley Hills Cheese Shoppe - a local foodie institution, owned by another Austrian ex-pat called Norbert Wabnig. From there, Manfred graduated to running a hotel (with much success) before he went into business for himself, as a partner in Campanile Restaurant and the adjoining La Brea Bakery. It wasn’t long before these businesses were doing very well indeed, with Manfred running the front of house and the wine buying - a job that he took very seriously and was immediately lauded by the Wine Spectator for having one of the finest wine lists in the country. It was during this time that Manfred’s love for wine really began to take hold. He was conducting daily tastings with suppliers and regularly visiting wine regions around the world, making friends, asking lots of questions and coming up with an idea…. 

This idea would become a reality in the early ‘90s, with the release of the first of Manfred’s ‘project wines’. He had decided that he wanted a ‘house wine’ for Campanile, but a house wine with a difference. He couldn’t understand why the house wine was always the cheapest one on a restaurant’s list - it was supposed to represent the house, after all - so he decided to flip the concept on its head and make a small amount (100 cases) of a house wine to be proud of. He had become friends with winemaker Bryan Babcock and persuaded him to do an exclusive bottling of chardonnay for him from the 1990 vintage. Manfred wanted an interesting label for the wine, so he approached one of the restaurant’s celebrity clients (and another personal friend) - New York pop-art artist Jim Dine - who gave him the heart sketch that would be the centrepiece for the first label.

This coming together of wine and art was something that greatly appealed to Manfred and, as an artistic person himself, it would inspire him to use future labels as a platform to display his own work, or as he puts it “force people to look at it”. Bryan Babcock made ‘The Thief’, as this first wine was called, but Manfred interfered as much as he could - after all, he was a wine buyer and amateur wine-making expert by now ;-) The wine proved to be a hit, being sold exclusively through Campanile Restaurant and causing a bit of a buzz among the local wine loving community.

The next year, Manfred followed it up with another wine from the 1990 vintage, but an even more ambitious project, having the juice (a blend of local and international varieties) made in Piedmont by the Coppo brothers. This time, Manfred did the label himself, calling the wine Terzetto and having 50 cases made. From the 1992 vintage Manfred opted to come back to California, with a Syrah/Cabernet blend made at Haven Vineyards in the Napa Valley.

The ‘project’ was now well and truly underway, with customers seeking out Campanile to come and taste these incredible creations that could be found nowhere else. Manfred was busy expanding the business - La Brea bakery and Campanile were both household names in California and the bakery was opening new branches further and further afield - but the wine side of things was dominating his thoughts and, increasingly, his time. For the next wine (1993 vintage) Manfred wanted to create something reminiscent of a wine that he had recently fallen in love with, Château de Beaucastel’s Roussanne Vielles Vignes. John Alban, owner and winemaker at Alban Vineyards, had become close friends with Manfred and agreed to give the Austrian some of his Roussanne “as long as you are serious”. Manfred was serious, and it was this project wine that would turn him into a full time winemaker. He worked very closely with John on the 1993 ‘Roussanne is Coming’, making 295 cases under that label and 40 cases under his preferred label ‘Legs’. He was worried that ‘Legs’ wouldn’t get clearance from the BATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms) for being indecent - this one got through, but the BATF would outlaw a future design for a wine called ‘The Good Girl’ which depicted a naked man with his face in a nun’s lap.

With the Roussanne proving to be another hit, Manfred decided that the time was right to give the project a name and from the 1994 vintage the wines would be released under the Sine Qua Non umbrella, although each would very much retain its own personality.
“I’ve never made the same wine twice - but nobody does.” The idea of unique cuvées every year is something that has become part of the SQN legend, but Manfred doesn’t see it as a big deal. He resents the idea that every year he gets in his car and drives around from vineyard to vineyard trying desperately to secure some wine for his next release - that is obviously not how it works and his vineyard sources have stayed very consistent over the years. The results that each vineyard give and the way in which Manfred makes the wine and blends the parcels will be adapted to suit the vintage conditions and the idea he has for the wine, therefore he thinks it is only right to present the wines as different from one another. They are, after all, unique.

From the ’94 vintage, Manfred and his now wife Elaine (the girl from Mykonos) released just one wine, 100 cases of a Syrah from the Bien Nacido vineyard called ‘Queen of Spades’. This, and the Roussanne from Alban the year before, were evidence of Manfred’s increasing passion for wines and varietals from the Rhône Valley. Although he would continue to make wines from non-Rhône grapes in the years to come, his goal became, over time, to work with fruit from his own vineyard sources and these would be planted primarily to the grapes found in his beloved Côte-Rôtie and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Although SQN was now a full time wine business and Manfred was making those wines himself, the project wines weren’t a thing of the past. In 1997 - from the 1995 vintage - he made a wine from Arroyo Grande vineyard with John Alban to commemorate the late Jacques Reynaud of CNDP’s Château Rayas (Manfred’s favourite wine). The blend of 60% Grenache and 40% Syrah was called ‘Tant Pis’, a French slang term that means ‘OK, whatever’ and was a stock response of the great man. The label featured a photo of Reynaud taken by Manfred and was further evidence of his Rhône-ish leanings.

At this time, things really started to take off for SQN. Robert Parker had been tipped off that something incredible was happening in Manfred’s corner of California and he called them to find out if he could pay them a visit. When he did, and when he published his notes in the Wine Advocate, he gave a call to arms to his readership:

“Oh how I wish there were more small producers such as Elaine and Manfred Krankl. Take my advice - get on their mailing list!”

This, and the high scores given to the wines, really got the wine community abuzz. The cult had gone international and the next chapter in the SQN story was about to begin.

The time had come to find a proper home for SQN, and for Manfred to dedicate himself to the task full-time. In 1997 he sold most of his shares in Campanile and La Brea and began looking for a building that could be the Sine Qua Non winery. Sick and tired of the constant travelling between work in LA, his home near Ventura and the various vineyards that he was working with scattered around Santa Barbara and beyond, Elaine demanded that Manfred find a suitable space close to home. Not wedded to the dream of a beautiful countryside winery nestled inbetween the vines, he was actually far more interested in doing something different. With that in mind, he took a lease on an industrial unit behind Ventura’s main shopping street, where his next door neighbours were a surf-board manufacturer and a plant pot producer. This would become SQN’s home for over a decade and was described by Robert Parker like this:

“The ultimate ‘garage’ winery, this operation’s back alley warehouse looks like a set scene from the movie Mad Max, but inside are the elixirs of dreams.”

The mailing list that Parker had instructed his subscribers to get on had quickly become the hottest ticket in Californian wine. By 1996 production had increased to 2000 cases (from the original 100), but the list was already full. A waiting list for the mailing list was set-up and the wait currently stands at 7-10 years before you receive your first allocation. Most allocations will be of 6 bottles (for the ‘larger’ production cuvées) or 2/3 bottles (for the more limited production wines), with no-one receiving less than two bottles per bottling and no one getting more than 12 bottles of a given wine. Production has now settled at around the 3500 case mark, but there are no plans to extend this any further - rather than that, the plan was to shift the source of fruit from the vineyards/growers they had previously been working with (Bien Nacido, Alban, Eleven Confessions etc) to their own estate fruit. The process of buying their own land and shifting this supply base is well underway, with the plan that most of their fruit will one day come from SQN vineyards. Manfred and Elaine also decided to move out of their home on the Ventura industrial park, and after completing their ‘home ranch’ winery adjacent to theirCumulus vineyard they have now completed the transition from pet project to fully fledged ‘domaine’.
Manfred’s philosophy on wine is unashamedly Californian — indeed, he describes himself as “an unapologetic Californian producer.” As far as he is concerned, there is a spectrum with France at one end, Australia at the other and California somewhere in the middle. He believes that his wines should be true to where they come from, in the sense that they will be big, they will be powerful and they will have lots of fruit and alcohol. He loves the Rhône Valley, but he isn’t trying to make French wines in the USA. Another, slightly contradictory, element to his approach is that despite his love of great French wine and although he has always been very concerned about what sites his fruit comes from, he is open about the fact that he produces winemaker wines rather than vins de terroir. When he decided to become a full time (and completely self/friend-taught) winemaker, his initial thought was to choose the 15 ‘best’ wineries in the world, visit them and find out what the common ideas were so that he could apply them to his own project. This quickly went out the window when he realised that there was no common thread to the way they made their wines - different viticulture, different barrel sizes, ages and maturation programs, different maceration times etc etc. What he did see though, was that each of these great producers (I’ve no idea who they were…) shared a singularity of vision - an instinct that what they were doing was right and a belief that the quality of their wines would win out.

“Good wines taste like everything else but great wines are unique” is an adage that Manfred is very much a believer in. But he also sees the vision of the winemaker as a critical part of the winemaking process - no ‘minimal intervention’ at Sine Qua Non.

“The uniqueness of wine comes from the character and 100% conviction of the person making it, and their hopes and dreams for the wine.”

Manfred insists that he wants to marry the flamboyant Californian style that is a natural by product of their growing conditions, with grace and elegance. Over the years he has come to prefer fruit from cooler climate sites, especially for his Syrah. This informed his decision about where to purchase the plots of vines that make up today’s SQN. Viticulture is organic in practice, although not certified, and yields are very low at around 20 hl/ha. The portfolio of vineyards has changed over the years - as mentioned previously, they are moving towards using exclusively their own fruit but this is still a work in progress. For now, there are 6 active sites from which SQN wines are made:

**Eleven Confessions:** Up in the Santa Rita Hills, this a cool climate plot of Syrah planted in 2001, that is usually harvested last and gives fruit of superb ripeness.

**The Third Twin:** This plot of Syrah (with a little Petit Sirah) was purchased in 2010 and is located in the Central Coast, near the town of Los Alamos. The soils are sandy and the climate moderate, but the Krankls are very happy with the fruit and have recently planted another block in extremely sandy soils, which should come on stream from 2014.

**Molly Aida:** This small vineyard near Santa Maria is high up in the Tepusquet Canyon (1800ft elevation) and was planted to Mourvedre in 2012, trained in bush vines.

**White Hawk:** This site is not owned by SQN, but they have been working the vines on contract for many years and love the fruit so much. Manfred says that he has worked so hard on this site over the years that they think of it as their own. It is close to The Third Twin and shares the same sandy soil type and the fruit they work with there is also Syrah.

**Bien Nacido:** This vineyard in Santa Maria is where it all began for SQN - the fruit for the 1994 wine that was the first under the SQN label came from Bien Nacido and they continue to look after vines there to this day. They tend Chardonnay here, as well as an experimental block of Grenache, Mourvedre, Roussanne and Marsanne.

**Cumulus:** This site is a bit different to the others. Owned by Manfred and Elaine, it is the vineyard next to their winery on the ‘home ranch’. There are a number of different plots, some planted in 2004 (Syrah, Grenache and Roussanne) and some planted in 2008 (to Petite Manseng and Touriga Nacional!). One of the plots is trained on very dense, Cote-Rotie style poles (4350 vines per/acre) and is planted on its own rootstock. Thus far, most of the fruit from this warm vineyard site has not been used for “Next of Kyn”, a sister project that Manfred started with the 2007 vintage.